

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 48: MP3 Music, part two ***

When we left our hero (in issue 46,) Kevin had been bitten by the MP3 bug, learned about this incredible tool for hearing music on the computer, and found an MP3 player. In this issue, Kevin explores Internet sites where he downloads MP3 music -- legal and illicit. Then, he takes to making his own MP3 files.

-.-.- Downloading MP3s -.-.-

There are two distinct types of MP3 files on the Internet -- legal ones and illegal ones. Legitimate MP3s have been put online by their creators for you to enjoy. That is, the people who own the copyright to the music have chosen to share it. Legitimate MP3s songs are easy to find -- and listening to them won't lead to an unsightly buildup of bad karma.

The bad news? The mainstream recording industry hasn't exactly embraced MP3, so legitimate recordings from bands you've heard on the radio are rare. In fact, many people in the recording industry see MP3s as a major threat, and rightly so. Because it's so easy to create great-sounding MP3 files from a CD and share those files for free online, the recording industry stands to lose big bucks to do-it-yourself sound pirates who would rather trade songs like baseball cards than pay \$18 for a CD. So chances are your favorite top 40 group isn't on the MP3 bandwagon yet.

On the other hand, a few well-known artists and labels are experimenting with MP3. Among them are the Beastie Boys, Dionne Warwick, and Taylor Dayne. Some artists make selected tracks available for free to spur sales of CDs, while others are taking the next step: selling MP3 tunes directly via the Internet.

What you'll find most of all while perusing legitimate MP3 web sites is music from bands you've never heard of. There are hundreds of bands, covering every genre from blues to techno. Just because you've never heard of these little bands doesn't mean they're no good -- in fact, I've discovered some great music. Then again, there's a reason that some of these bands remain in obscurity: they stink.

Sites like MP3.com and the Internet Underground Music Archive allow you to select music by genre, but it's almost always a crap shoot with no-name bands. If you're interested in hearing new music and indie bands, this is a great way to do so. You'll be pleasantly surprised when you find a great song -- but brace yourself for the truly bad ones.

Two sites with massive collections of free, legitimate MP3 music files are MP3.com and the Internet Underground Music Archive:

MP3.com: <http://www.mp3.com>

Internet Underground Music Archive: <http://www.iuma.com>

Illegal MP3s -- music files shared without the permission of the copyright holders -- are said to abound on the Internet. If your favorite bands don't release MP3 music, your friends on the Internet will do it for them. I could get on my soapbox and yammer on about why piracy is wrong, but I won't. I'll just say this: trying to get music from pirate MP3 sites is a big pain in the Hootie.

The sites are easy enough to find using any search engine, but then you'll run into dead links galore -- since many of these sites are quickly removed by ISPs. Sites that do exist may only offer a handful of songs for download (even though they claim to have an archive of thousands). Other sites require you to upload a song for each one that you download. I'm no expert in the pirate MP3 scene, maybe I don't know where to look, but two hours of searching the backwaters of the Net yielded very few MP3 songs, none of which I even cared to hear.

-.-.- Roll your own -.-.-

Sharing copyrighted music is illegal, but it's perfectly legal for you to create MP3 files for your own use from CDs that you own. Encoding a single song or an entire CD is simple if you're armed with a CD-ROM drive and encoding software. Creating an MP3 file from a CD track is a two-step process: first, you must convert the CD audio to a file format native to the computer such as AIFF or WAV -- this process is called "ripping". Next, that file is converted to an MP3 file: this is called encoding. Depending on the software you use, ripping and encoding can be a one-step or two-step process.

You could "rip" your favorite tracks from otherwise forgettable CDs to create a "best of" MP3 mix folder. If you have removable storage like a Zip or Jaz drive, you could put those MP3 files onto a removable cartridge and enjoy your tunes whenever you're in the mood. (Giving copies of those files to anyone or uploading them to the Internet is copyright infringement.)

Encoding a file is a intensive process, so be prepared to see a lot of the "busy" icon while your computer slogs through the chore of creating an MP3 file.

MusicMatch Jukebox is a well-regarded all-in-one ripper/encoder and player for Windows. It is \$29.99 shareware. Other programs are available, including some that are free. Detailed lists of rippers and encoders are available from MP3.com.

MusicMatch Jukebox: <http://www.musicmatch.com/jukebox/>

MP3.com's list of Windows rippers: <http://www.mp3.com/software/cdrippers.html>

MP3.com's list of Windows encoders: <http://www.mp3.com/software/encoders.html>

The only one-step Mac ripper/encoder I've found on the Internet is MPEG Audio Creator. It's certainly easy to use. However, this program can only create MPEG 1 layer 2 files (dubbed MP2), an older version of the file format that creates slightly larger files.

MPEG Audio Creator: <http://www3.pair.com/odreer/mpeg.html>

Until someone writes a Mac freeware or shareware MP3 ripping/encoding tool, creating true MP3 files requires two programs. CDtoAIFF is an old shareware program that will create an AIFF file from a CD track. The other part of the solution is Mpecker Encoder, which turns that AIFF into an MP3 file.

CDtoAIFF: <http://www.musicglobalnetwork.com/Mac.html>

Mpecker Encoder: <http://www.anime.net/~go/mpeckers.html>

There you have it: the story of how a car commercial got me hooked on a forgotten '80s band, led me to learn more than I thought I wanted to know about MP3, and caused me to use every last bit of hard drive space to store countless music files. I gotta stop watching so much TV.

=*=*= SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE =*=*=

MP3.com: <http://www.mp3.com>
Internet Underground Music Archive: <http://www.iuma.com>
MusicMatch Jukebox: <http://www.musicmatch.com/jukebox/>
MPEG Audio Creator: <http://www3.pair.com/odreer/mpeg.html>
CDtoAIFF: <http://www.musicglobalnetwork.com/Mac.html>
Mpecker Encoder: <http://www.anime.net/~go/mpeckers.html>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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